

## Predominant narratives shaping education in Pakistan: historical and sociological perspectives

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- 1 The presentation seeks to identify, trace and analyze some of the dominant narratives that over the period have structured and shaped educational endeavor in Pakistani society since its independence as a nation-state in 1947. From the very outset, it should be made clear that what is presented here is one of many possible interpretations/readings of the topic. In the following lines, a brief outline of predominant discourses and narratives shaping education in Pakistan is presented.

## **Postcolonial identity narrative and education**

- 2 A major narrative which, in hindsight, could be regarded as a “meta-narrative” that has shaped the character, content and outlook of the Pakistani national education system could be referred to as the postcolonial national identity narrative.
- 3 Having acquired its political independence as a nation-state in 1947, Pakistan, as a newly born country, met with the challenge of articulating its distinct identity, i.e. expressing national selfhood so as to consciously and representationally demark and distance itself from a) its past colonial imprints and b) the dominant religio-sociocultural force of Hinduism (a demographic majority which was then such a fresh and important element in the social and body-politic experiences of Muslim immigrant communities that had crossed over physical borders to make Pakistan their new home, albeit while keeping their existing sociocultural ties, memories and friendships intact in more way than one). In order to do this, the state education system was employed as a key apparatus for national identity construction, especially through its curricular content.

- 4 Talking about this process of identity construction, Kumar (2001) observes that Pakistan had to invent its identity twice: first, at the time of its independence; and second, at the time when the then East-Pakistan wing, now known as Bangladesh, became separated and independent from it in 1971. Both these historical contexts have shaped school subjects and their contents.

## Narrative of religious nationalism: Islamization and education

- 5 At both the key junctures of identity (re)inventions, as pointed out by Kumar, the religious narrative of Islam – as a religio-ideological base – formed the national narrative defining the character and destiny of Pakistan. The ideology of Islam was referred to as the basis for the creation of Pakistan as a separate homeland (the whole notion of two-nation theory formed the official discourse around which political struggle against the Hindu-dominated political majority and colonial masters was carried out). The same religio-ideological discourse informed the character and content of education: policy outlook and national school curricula. Over the post-1971 period, and during the era of Zia-ul-Haq, especially, this ideological discourse was further reinforced significantly in and through school curricula. In this regard, certain school subjects such as Pakistan studies and Islamiyat became compulsory subjects to be taught in schools. In this manner, the religious narrative and national-identity narrative became intertwined, and education, curricula and popular media played significant role in associating these two narratives in the social imaginary of the Pakistani society.
- 6 In order to understand how the postcolonial-identity narrative and the narrative of religious nationalism (Islamization of education) have been constructed through and, in turn, have influenced the very character and content of national school curricula, a report from Nayyar and Salim on the state of curricula, entitled *The Subtle Subversion: The State of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistani Society* (2002), can be usefully analyzed.

## Narrative of enlightened moderation: post-9/11 realities and discourses

- 7 Building upon Kumar's argument, it could be added that the third time Pakistan had to invent its identity was in response to the situations and scenarios created post-9/11. In this respect, under the leadership of General/President Musharraf, a discourse of "enlightened moderation" was put forward and championed by various civil society/social actors, the intelligentsia, and media. This discourse substantially underpinned the shaping of "new" educational policy for Pakistan. It is also observed that media gained significant visibility around that time. A critical review of the media would suggest that it is a very powerful institution in Pakistan, and champions the simultaneous multiple narratives of enlightened moderation, religious/national twin-identity narratives, Islamic ideological discourse, market and neoliberal economic discourses, and so forth. These narratives are alive and agile, significantly shaping Pakistani society. It should be noted that no significant dedicated media channel on education exists as yet to educate youth and society at large.

## Globalization narrative and education

- 8 Globalization is yet another powerful narrative that is impacting on contemporary Pakistani education in general and higher-education reforms in particular. Analysis of Pakistan's recent educational policy clearly indicates that the country is responding to the possibilities and challenges of globalization. In this respect, educational policy discourse seems to be addressing the key question and tension of reconciling global and local, universal and particular, the global cultural other and the self. The analysis of select excerpts from Pakistan's educational policy shows how the global-local dynamics are at play and how these dynamics in turn are shaping the educational response. To these, one could also add developmental discourses as well as discourses on the marketization and commercialization of education, which are at play in the public/private educational sectors.
- 9 To come back to the globalization discourse and the responses articulated in educational policy, it should be observed that educational curricula still need to be developed to reflect the approach presented in the policy. Currently, this is a significant gap, i.e., the absence of appropriate school curricula that could help students negotiate, and navigate between, the global and the local, cultural diversity and identity (Dattoo, 2009).

## (Non)concluding remarks

- 10 The narratives presented here seem to define the contents and outlook of education which, in turn, socialize students in a particular set of worldviews and underpinning values. For example, the postcolonial-identity narrative tends to espouse certain values based on which a notion of self-identity is constructed. On the other hand, the globalization narrative, especially in the context of "enlightened moderation", partially embraces the possibilities and values of inclusivity and pluralism. At the same time, the discourse of neoliberal market economies expressed in and through media-supported consumer culture (which evidently taking hold in Pakistan, especially in megacities such as Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and so forth) is interjecting certain kinds of values into the society, for example where one's social status and social capital are significantly determined by the brand s/he uses: clothes, cellphones, or accessories.
- 11 It is also true, that the different narratives establish themselves in different contexts depending upon the social class and economic background, gender, digital access, social capital, media access, and so forth, of an individual or a particular social group. Urbanization and semi-urbanization are also powerful contextual factors as they determine access to economic opportunities, social motilities, and associated social and cultural capitals, as well as digital and media access.
- 12 All these competing narratives are at play in contemporary Pakistani society, and form the *habitus* within which young people operate, and interpret and respond to the world (locally and globally). To what extent is education today equipped to guide Pakistani youth in such a context? What kind of education is needed? What narratives or "new" narratives are needed to educating young today?

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**Mots-clés:** discours sur l'école, islam, politique éducative, système éducatif

**Keywords:** discourse on education, educational policy, educational system

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